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YOUTHFUL PLEASURE:

A Sermon,

Preached in St. Andrew's Church, Philadelphia, by appointment, before the "Philadelphia Young Men's Society,"

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Ecclesiastes xi. 9.—"*Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth, and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the way of thy heart and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things* GOD *will bring thee into judgment.*"

THE soundest maxims of human and divine wisdom attach great importance to the period of youth and early manhood. Solomon appears to have employed his divinely-inspired and richly-furnished mind almost wholly in the service of the young. He set in order his proverbs, that he might impart to the young man knowledge and discretion. He brought down the sublimest truths to the every-day walks of life, that he might introduce wisdom into close and cherished companionship with the young, that they might hear and love her godly admonitions.

He made wisdom to utter her voice in the streets,—to stand in the top of high places,—to cry in the chief place of concourse, by the way, in the city, and at the opening of the gates, saying, Hear! for I will speak of excellent things, and the opening of my lips shall be right things. Hearken unto me, for blessed are they that keep my ways. Behold, I will pour out my Spirit upon you, and make known my words unto you. If thou seekest for wisdom as silver, and searchest

for her as for hid treasures, then shalt thou understand the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge of GOD; then shalt thou understand righteousness and equity, yea, and every good path.

He makes wisdom to utter every variety of instruction, from the simple apothegm or proverb, to the profoundest conceptions of truth, and the loftiest embodyings of divine thought. But never does he present her with an aspect so majestically severe as when, standing amid the haunts of youthful pleasure, she lifts her hand and points to the judgment throne, and saith in language of solemn and awful irony, *Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth, and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the way* of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes; *but know thou, that* FOR ALL THESE THINGS GOD WILL BRING THEE INTO JUDGMENT.

This inspired monarch seems to take it for granted, that notwithstanding it is rendered so indubitably certain that GOD will bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, and notwithstanding it is made so clear that the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the holy is understanding, yet there will be multitudes among the young, who, in a career of guilty pleasure, will set at nought the counsels of wisdom, and despise, and wonder, and perish. He seems to take it as a given point, that multitudes will obey the strong natural propensities of their hearts, and prefer the pleasures of sin for a season, to the pleasures which are at GOD's right hand for evermore. He knew that the great springs of moral action were disordered, and that thousands upon thousands among the young men of every populous city, and of every widely-extended country, would debase the nobler energies of their souls, and, even while wisdom was lifting up her voice of warning and entreaty, yield themselves willing captives to passion and pleasure. It is in this view, that, as the youthful transgressor is listening or yielding to the seductive and fascinating allurements of sin, he again personifies Wisdom, standing, as it were, by the throne of the almighty Judge, and laying her wearied arm upon the book of GOD's

remembrance, and saying to the young man, "Enter not into the path of the wicked, and go not in the way of evil men; avoid it; pass not by it; turn from it, and pass away:" and to those who heed not her counsels, but choose rather to eat of the fruit of their own ways, and be filled with their own devices, she saith (even as the arrows of the ALMIGHTY are within them, the poison whereof drinketh up their spirit) —"Because I have called, and ye have refused; because I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded; but ye have set at nought my counsels, and would none of my reproof: I also will laugh at your calamity; I will *mock* when your fear cometh, when your fear cometh as destruction, and your desolation as a whirlwind."

The awful irony of the text brings before us the career of a young man who is walking in the way of his heart, and in the sight of his eyes; and leads us forward to the issues of the judgment to witness the termination of that career.

To rejoice in youth, in the sense of the text,—to let one's heart cheer him in the days of youth,—to walk in the way of his heart and in the sight of his eyes, means, to cast off the fear of GOD and the concern of the soul,—to give one's self up to the control of the giddy and tumultuous passions of youth,—to follow the bent of inclination, and the suggestions of a deceived heart;—in a word, to yield to the fascinations of pleasure—

> Who weaves the winding-sheet of souls,
> And lays them in the urn of everlasting death.

Why should not every young man of this audience do so? Thousands have,—and have only perished! Myriads, since the text was written, have literally taken wisdom at her word, and challenged the tremendous scrutiny of the Judge of quick and dead; and why should not the manly and dignified experiment be made by the youth of this generation?

Let us, my dear hearers, consider one or two reasons why such a course *might seem* to be desirable to make a young man happy.

I. It *promises* a great deal of enjoyment.

Look upon the young man who walks in the way of his heart, and in the sight of his eyes. Does not his heart swell high with anticipated pleasure? Is he not happy? Does he not rejoice in his youth? Does he not cheer himself in the days of his youth? What, if in spite of his efforts to banish serious thoughts, he has sometimes a fearful looking for of judgment? What, though the choicest fruit he plucks in the garden of pleasure be like the apples of Sodom, full of bitterness and ashes? What, though the most exhilarating cup of sensual delight have a death-worm in the dregs thereof, that biteth like a serpent, and stingeth like an adder? What, though the mind of that pleasure-loving youth become enervated, and his soul, polluted and debased by passion, prostitute her noble powers to the service of iniquity unto iniquity? Is he not happy? Copy out his thoughts; are they not of pleasure? Record his conversation in the intervals of business or study; is it not of anticipated, promised pleasure? What, though the entreaties of parental love, and the tender yearnings of parental solicitude, and the agonizing intercessions of parental prayer be sometimes heard to damp the ardor of youthful emotion, and imbitter the 'feast of passion and the flow of soul?' What, though in his midnight dreams of anticipated pleasure, he is sometimes startled by the spectre of a deceased or absent parent, haunting the chambers of imagery, and 'teaching each scene the note of wo?' What, though the soul, in its waste of passion and exhaustion of spirits, is sometimes waked to a bitter and harrowing sense of its desolation? He is the physician of his own enjoyment. He knows of some antidote of potent and sovereign power. He knows how to rally spirits that are only jaded by a too passionate and ardent pursuit of pleasure. He knows how to charm into his service some demon of wild and tumultuous joy. He knows how to make his shattered nerves dance again in thrilling ecstasies of pleasure.

Follow him in this intellectual and dignified experiment. It is true, wisdom saith, Wine is a mocker, and strong drink is raging. But he is not a pupil of the severe school of wisdom.

He walks in the way of his heart. It is true an awful sound is in his ears. As he puts forth his hand, he hears a voice thundering as from the oracles of God, Who hath wo? who hath sorrow? who hath contentions? who hath babbling? who hath wounds without cause? who hath redness of eyes? They that tarry long at the wine; they that go to seek mixed wine; they that are mighty to mingle strong drink. It is true, the monitions of divine prudence utter a solemn warning to this pleasure-loving youth, but he would disdain to listen to the monitions of prudence. He walketh in the sight of his eyes, and in the way of his heart,—and his heart now muttereth perverse things. He lifts the potent and exhilarating antidote to his lips. Ah! he is as one that lieth down in the midst of the sea, or as he that lieth on the top of a mast. But see how the lustre of impassioned intellect beams from the eye of that young man! How it sparkles, as with the frenzied scintillations of genius! 'How in that eye the death-sparks flash and fade!' Is not that pleasure? He babbles; is not that wit? He laughs; is not that rational, refined, high-souled enjoyment? But his eye has now lost that fiery brilliancy; still it swims as in a liquid element of pleasure, till the heavy lid covers it, and it retires into the giddy chambers of the soul. The head falls upon the shoulder. The fancy reposes as in the hazy atmosphere of an idiot's dreams. Reason listens for a while to a sound, as of a distant, dying knell, and then relapses into fitful slumbers amid the fumes of a half-ignited and smouldering brain. Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth, and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth. But see! he wakes; the morning is as the shadow of death unto him. He wakes to listen to the upbraidings of a conscience that will not sleep, and to feel throughout every throbbing nerve and every pulsation of the heart, and in the movement of every relaxed and torpid muscle, that there is a keen and exquisite significancy in those words of wisdom,—*at the last, it biteth like a serpent, and stingeth like an adder.*

But that young man has begun the experiment of cheering himself in the days of his youth. He is the master and phy-

sician of his own destiny. An unchecked career of profligate and licentious pleasure promises him enjoyment. He communes with a deceived heart that hath turned him aside. He takes counsel of his passions, and they promise him enjoyment, saying, Stolen waters are sweet. Ah! do not his feet go down to death? Do not his steps take hold on hell? What avails it, that wisdom lifts up her voice again in tones of awful and severe remonstrance? There are seven abominations of guilty and licentious pleasure in his heart. He shall mourn at the last, when his flesh and his body are consumed, and say, How have I hated instruction, and my heart despised reproof. He shall suck the poison of asps, the tongue of the viper shall slay him. A fire not blown shall consume him. The heaven shall reveal his iniquity. His eye shall see his destruction, and he shall drink of the wrath of the ALMIGHTY. GOD WILL BRING HIM INTO JUDGMENT.

II. Another reason why a course of sinful pleasure *would seem* to be desirable to make a young man happy, is its tendency to dethrone the authority of conscience,—to dissipate serious reflection, and effectually to harden the heart against the intrusion of annoying and troublesome thoughts of death and eternity.

Among the thousands of young men whose names are enrolled on the schedule of an infidel society in the commercial metropolis of these United States, how many may be found who have already succeeded, by walking in the way of their hearts, and in the sight of their eyes,—in stifling the remonstrances and rebukes of conscience! And among those who are attached to secret infidel clubs in almost every considerable city, and throughout the breadth of the land, nay, of those connected with our Lyceums, and Mechanics' and Merchants' Institutes, how many may be found who appear to have succeeded in hardening their hearts against religious impressions, and banishing the thoughts of temperance, righteousness and judgment, utterly away from them! Others have only to persevere in the same course of unbelief and sinful pleasure, and they will soon arrive at that enviable point in their moral history, at which fallen and ruined spirits will exult, and good

angels, who minister to those who are to be heirs of salvation, will abandon them for ever! They have only to persevere in their resistance of every gracious impression, and drown the remonstrances of conscience in the pleasures of sin, and they will soon possess, what by thousands among the young is so much desired to make them happy, a heart dead to every sentiment of religion, to every hope of enjoyment beyond the present life.

Until a young man of pleasure arrives at *this* state of hardened impenitence, a dreadful sound will be at intervals in his ears. A youthful conscience, before it becomes seared, possesses tremendous power.

You will observe this strikingly illustrated in the history of the youth of pure sentiments and morals, who has just been removed from the watchful and prayerful nurture of parental guardianship in the country, to an apprenticeship or clerkship in a populous city. Though in an unconverted state, he is a child of faith and prayer. He has a heart that needs the renovating and transforming power of divine grace, though his conscience is tender and susceptible. The last injunctions of his fond parents, as he left the threshold of home were, "My son, if sinners entice thee, consent thou not. My son, keep thy father's commandment, and forsake not the law of thy mother. Wisdom is the principal thing: with all thy gettings, get wisdom; exalt her, and she shall promote thee: she shall bring thee to honor when thou dost embrace her. Acknowledge God in all thy ways, and he will direct thy paths; seek his blessing which maketh rich, and addeth no sorrow with it." For a season this youth resists the enticements of those into whose companionship he is thrown. The sinful pleasures with which they have learned to cheer themselves, at first shock every sentiment of religion in his conscience, every impression of piety upon his heart. He is steadfast for a time. Yet, though *entreaty* cannot prevail with this child of many prayers, bantering and trick and ridicule may. He is taunted by his companions, as puny and mean-spirited. His Bible is perhaps hidden, and a jest-book put in its place! His secret

prayers, if he has learned to pray, are overheard and repeated in solemn mockery. But it was only to show him with what saintly intonations he approached the throne of GOD! The laugh is raised against him outright. He becomes ashamed of such puritanical habits. His Bible and his hours of prayer are gradually abandoned. The severity of ridicule on the part of his companions gradually relaxes, and he begins to cheer himself with them. The first gross violation of duty next to the neglect of his Bible and prayer, is perhaps a sabbath profanation on some excursion of pleasure. Conscience leaves him, it may be, for that day to the way of his heart, and the sight of his eyes. But when he returns at night, she *reckoneth with him.* She shaketh her scorpions over his pillow; she bindeth a fillet of adders around his brow; she poureth the fiery element of remorse through every avenue of his soul. Sleep departs from him. He communes with his own heart upon his bed; he mourns and saith, How have I hated instruction, and mine heart despised reproof. Surely GOD scorneth the scorners, for the curse causeless does not come. When wisdom entered into my soul, and knowledge was pleasant unto me, then discretion preserved me, understanding kept me. When I lay down my sleep was sweet. I was not afraid of the desolation of the wicked when it cometh. Now I am almost in all evil. I am of those that rebel against the light. I am as in the terrors of the shadows of death; hell is naked before me; destruction hath no covering.

Oh! what tremendous power has the conscience of the youthful transgressor, when thus awakened to do its office, as the vicegerent of an avenging and holy GOD! With what awful distinctness it utters, as in the inner shrines of his soul,—

> ——— Horrid prophecies of pain,
> Severer and severer yet to come,
> And as he writhes, and quivers,
> Scorch'd within, breathes upon his lips
> And parched tongue the withering blasts of hell.

How can that youth be happy, till he either learns to cheer himself without being thus terribly reckoned with by conscience,

or till he seeks peace of conscience and joy in the Holy Ghost? But he has taken a bold step in sin,—hath gone with the wicked, even with those who have not known the ways of peace. His courage to resist temptation has, to an alarming degree, forsaken him; but he bribes his conscience with the flattering unction that he is yet comparatively moral. He returns perhaps secretly to his Bible and to prayer. But he has no relish for these holy duties. What shall the poor young man do? Why, rejoice in his youth, walk in the way of his heart, and in the sight of his eyes. But then he knows too well, that for all these things God will bring him into judgment; and this thought tortures him with agony, with wo begun,—the symbol of the worm that never dies. Still let him, in spite of conscience, in spite of an awful looking for of judgment, in spite of the tribulation and anguish which he knows will come upon him, yield again and again to temptation,—profane the hallowed day of God,—neglect or stifle his convictions of truth,—set at nought the counsels and entreaties and reproofs of parental love,—forsake the sanctuaries of religion,—sneer at the passion-scene of Gethsemane,—pour contempt upon the sacraments of grace, and the ministry of reconciliation,—join in the skeptics' laugh,—trample under foot the blood of the everlasting covenant,—impiously profane the eternal Spirit,—and he may, nay, he *will*, succeed at length in bidding utterly away from him every solemn impression of religion, every intrusive thought of God and eternity. He will at length succeed in getting that peace of a hardened and impenitent heart, which, while it treasureth up wrath against the day of wrath, and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, leaves the soul becalmed, till the tempest of divine indignation bursts upon it, and drives it a wreck over the dark waters of eternity.

Does not such a course seem to be desired to make a young man happy? But let us follow it to its termination. The young man hath restrained prayer, and utterly cast off the fear of God. He hath succeeded in banishing serious reflection. He is joined to his idols of pleasure. The Spirit of God

hath let him alone. You may see him carelessly sporting about the tree of life, as if he were an insect of an hour. But he is approaching the end of his career.—We need not follow him through the disgusting and sickening details of that career. He enters at length the outer porch of ruin, as a youthful debauchee. It were too revolting to follow him through the protracted wretchedness of a wasted, polluted, debased, sensual mind. It were too revolting to look forward to the shattered wreck of what he once was, hiding himself for very poverty and shame in some miserable garret; giving himself up to the dominion and scourge of passion, which has sated itself upon the energies of a once fair and vigorous constitution, and now only tantalizes him by promising pleasures which he can never enjoy, or tortures him by pouring the burning coals of remorse upon his head. The light is dark in his tabernacle; his own counsel casteth him down; his strength is hunger-bitten, and destruction is ready at his side. God casteth the fury of his wrath upon him. The heavens revealeth his iniquity, and the earth riseth up against him. He wringeth out the dregs of the cup of trembling. Though he hath forsworn the authority of conscience, remorse like the undying worm, preyeth upon his spirit. Though he hath hushed the voice of religion, and steeled his heart against every gracious impression, he is left to mourn at the last, and to see that he is going to the judgment with a lie in his right hand. His heart is cold and dead to every earthly affection. The memory of his childhood of pious instruction, may break at intervals, as a dream of light and beauty upon his soul, but it only startles him, as it were a moonbeam upon a sepulchre. He affects to sneer, in his desolation of spirit, at the remembered admonitions of a mother's love, and a sister's tenderness.—These dear ones have gone in broken-hearted sorrow to the grave; and this son, and brother, has become so utterly abandoned and heartless, that, if he had strength remaining, he could dance upon the tomb that enshrines their ashes. We approach the closing scene. Who are the attendants of his bed of death? Who watches by his pillow of agony!—Who

ministers consolation to his stricken and polluted soul? O, Spirit of the living GOD, where art thou now? Ministers of heaven's grace, where are ye now? Will ye abandon this dying youth in his loneliness and desolation?—I look through the universe of GOD for some ministering spirit. Is there none in heaven? Hath charity no balm for an immortal soul, that is beginning to drink the wrath of the ALMIGHTY? Will not hope lend him her anchor as he launcheth out unpiloted and alone upon the ocean of eternity? Will not faith allow him to lean upon her arm, as he trembleth on the verge of being? —Angels who minister to the heirs of salvation,—spirits of just men made perfect, will ye not come and weep around this gloomy death-bed? Is there nothing in the resources of infinite love to soothe the agony of this dying youth, or light up one ray of hope in his dark and abandoned spirit?—I hear a voice echoing through that lonely and desolate chamber of death, "He that is holy, let him be holy still; and he that is filthy, let him be filthy still:" "Know thou, that for all these things GOD will bring thee into judgment."—The agony of the death scene is over. I follow that disembodied spirit, not to the gloomy and chaotic regions of annihilation, to witness the means or the process by which a deathless soul can cease to be; I follow that guilty and ruined spirit, not to see on what wing of lightning it can speed its flight beyond the scrutiny of an omniscient GOD, who awaiteth its appearance as an enthroned Judge; I follow that soul to the judgment of GOD ALMIGHTY and the Lamb,—not to see it laying an audacious and impious hand upon the judgment-seat,—not to see it trample longer upon the eternal principles of equity and mercy,—not to hear it insulting an enthroned and divine Saviour,—not to see it attempting to tear the record of its guilt from the book of GOD's remembrance! I follow that disembodied soul as it lies speechless and powerless in the presence of the Judge, with a vivid, torturing sense of what it was, and might have been, and is, and will be for ever! Memory unfolds her record of abused grace, profaned sabbaths, despised mercies, and of every scene where pleasure banished the concerns of GOD and eternity,

whether it were of gay and thoughtless mirth, or wild and passionate revelry, or abandoned licentiousness. And a voice proclaims from the throne,—For all these things GOD HATH BROUGHT THEE INTO JUDGMENT. Depart, accursed, into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels!

Is there a being in the universe of GOD, who does not weep over the destiny of such a soul? O that the heavens were hung with sackcloth, and that every radiant star would withdraw its shining, and the sun and the moon be darkened, and deep call unto deep, in voices of wo and lamentation, while we celebrate the obsequies of that ruined soul!

My dear hearers, what a precious day of grace and mercy is left for you. All holy beings rejoice that your probation is not yet ended. The voice of divine wisdom and love, which calls all men every where to repentance, pleads in eloquent and subduing tenderness with you to turn unto the LORD, who will have mercy upon you, and to our GOD, who will abundantly pardon. Though a youthful sinner have done evil a hundred times, if he have not utterly quenched the Spirit of GOD, if he turn, and repent, and believe, in the atoning and redeeming Saviour there is hope. If he remember that GOD hath indeed laid help upon one who is mighty, one who saveth to the uttermost every returning sinner, he will find the unspeakable blessings of redemption near. O, if he will but "look unto JESUS," whose "blood cleanseth from all sin," he may learn to rejoice in hope of the glory of GOD. His sensual mind, that is now darkened and debased by sin, may become enlightened and purified, and ennobled and sanctified by the HOLY GHOST. His deceived heart, that now turneth him aside from the ways of holiness, and is polluted by sinful passions, may become the seat of holy affections and heavenly aspirations. His life, which is now frittered away in folly and sin, may be devoted to the high pursuits of a rational and immortal being; heaven may be his home; angels and the spirits of just men made perfect, his society; and a crown of glory that fadeth not away, his everlasting reward through grace.—*He that is wise is wise for himself;* but *he that scorneth,* he *alone shall bear it.*